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ABSTRACT

Because relatively few black males successfully complete college, this study sought to determine how black male freshmen at a predominantly white university differed from other freshmen in their values, aspirations, and assumptions about college life. In the fall of 1989, the ACT Entering Student Survey, plus 30 locally developed questions, was administered to all freshmen (N=1,728) who participated in New Student Orientation; of these, 1,357, or 79%, responded. Findings indicated that black males were less likely to report top high school grades and rank in class, more likely to have extrinsic rather that intrinsic reasons for being in college, more likely to value athletics, and less likely to report needing academic support services; it was also found that black males relied more on financial aid. Black women, however, appeared to be more successful, despite educational debt, possibly because they tended to enter with better academic records, better study habits and more intrinsically academic motivations for attending college. First semester performance data found only 58% of black males in good academic standing as opposed to 68% of the entire student body. Such results indicate the need for early intervention with students who demonstrate the characteristics of the black males in this study through academic advising and support. Included are one data table and eight references. (JB)

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BLACK MALES IN COLLEGE: AN ENDANGERED SPECIES?

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OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY: This study was conducted to determine how black male freshmen at a predominantly white university differed from the rest of the freshman class in their values, aspirations, and assumptions about college life.

FRAMEWORK FOR THE STUDY: Research concerning the status of minorities both in higher education and in American society documents a dangerous situation for black males. Whereas all other groups have improved their social and socioeconomic position, young black males score lower than others on SATs, receive lower grades in high school, drop out of high school at higher rates, enter college at lower rates, graduate at lower rates, and are more likely to be on probation, incarcerated, and in poverty (Allen, in Nettles, 1988; Carter & Wilson, 1989; Gibbs, 1988; Green 1989; Nettles, 1988; Wilson, 1990). Additionally, black males on predominantly white campuses have been identified as especially vulnerable to not persisting to graduation (Braddock & McPartland, in Nettles, 1988). These factors place many black males who do enter college into the category of those at "high risk," with a resultant high cost both to the individual and to society. It is therefore incumbent on institutions of higher education to identify the causes of the situation and to engage in behaviors that encourage persistence and success in the academic environment.

Research concerning black males in higher education is consistent with experiences at our institution. From 1987 through 1990, black males here have comprised only 4% to 7% of the freshman class, even though the total black population in the freshman class rose from 16% to 23% in the same amount of time. In 1989, the year of this study, 23% of the freshman were black, but only 6.6% were black males. Black males have historically had the lowest one- and two-year retention rates and the lowest graduation rates at this university (Sack, 1990).

In an attempt to understand some of the noncognitive factors that might be influencing the academic performance of this group, we studied the black male freshmen who entered the university in the fall of 1989 to determine how characteristics other than those collected routinely in the admissions process might differentiate black males from the rest of the class. The intent was to describe characteristics that were significantly different so that faculty and student affairs staff might intervene with future black male freshmen to enhance their chances of academic persistence and success.

METHOD: In the fall of 1989, we administered the ACT Entering Student Survey, plus 30 locally developed questions, to all freshmen who participated in New Student Orientation. Of the 1728 freshmen enrolled for the fall semester, we surveyed 1357 (79%). A comparison of the sample with the total freshman cohort indicated that our sample was essentially equivalent to the total sample on such demographic characteristics as race, gender, location of parents' home, and academic preparation. All responses were analyzed by four race/gender categories: black males, black females, white males, and white females. The sample was comprised of 71% white students, 21% black students, and 9% other. Black males (n=81) made up 6% of the sample (compared with 6.6% of the entire class). Chi square (Fisher's Exact Test) was the principal method of analysis.

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RESULTS:

Total Freshman profile. As a group, entering freshmen in 1989 were traditionally aged, predominantly white (71%), female (60%), and from Virginia (87%). They came directly from high school, were in the second quarter of their high-school graduating class, and had average to slightly above average SAT scores. They came with the intent of graduating from college, and reported being serious about studying. Women intended both to work more at money-earning jobs and to study more than men. They relied primarily on parents for financial support, with whites more likely than blacks to do so (77% of white females and males; 67% of black males; 64% of black females). In addition, approximately 50% of white students indicated that parents would provide 76% or more of their college expenses, while only about 25% of black students so indicated.

Over half of the entire class lacked confidence in at least some aspect of study skills, mathematics skills, speaking skills, and test-taking skills. Concerning motivation for attending college, they were less interested than a national comparison group in future money and status and more interested in academic values for their own sake, and also were less interested in social life and athletics, again with significant differences by race and gender. They had been active in extracurricular activities in high school, and intended to continue being active in college, again with differences in choice of activity by race and gender.

Black male profile. Black males' responses were significantly different (.05 or better) from the responses of their classmates on 25 of 87 relevant items. (These differences are listed in the Appendix.)

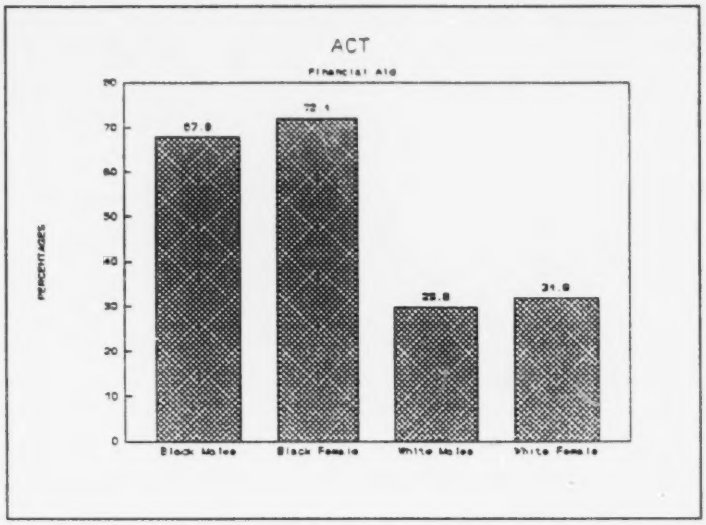
Pre-enrollment data. (Table 1) Thirty-eight percent of the entire sample reported their high school rank in class as being in the top quarter (45% of white females, 31% of white males and black females, 28% of black males). On the other hand, 30% of black males reported being in the third quarter, compared with 18% of the entire sample.

In terms of high-school grades earned, the results are similar. Whereas 36% of the entire sample reported a GPA in the range of A to B, only 24% of black males reported A to B grades. Conversely, whereas 6% of the total sample reported high school grades in the C to D range, 10% of the black males so reported. In terms of both rank in class and high school GPA, black males reported significantly lower performance than did the rest of the class (Appendix).

Table 1
PRE-ENROLLMENT DATA

	Black Males	Entire Sample
Top quarter of high school class	28%	38%
Third quarter of high school class	30%	18%
High School GPA A-B	24%	36%
High School GPA C-D	10%	6%

Financial aid. (Figure 1) Students were asked if they would receive any kind of financial aid while in college. Figure 1 illustrates that although 42% of all students answered yes, there were significant differences, primarily by race (72% of black females and 68% of black males answered yes, compared with 32% of white females and 30% of white males).



STUDENTS RECEIVING FINANCIAL AID
Figure 1

These data concerning financing for college indicate important differences among freshmen, particularly when analyzed by race. Black students, far more than white students, rely on financial aid, which is most often in the form of student loans that carry the promise of major debt. Black males were significantly more likely than their classmates to rely on educational grants, scholarships, loans, and employment both during the academic year and in the summer to finance their education (Appendix). In another part of the survey, students were asked to indicate the importance of a number of factors in influencing their choice of this university, among them the cost of attending the college. This factor was rated as "very important" by 57% of the black females, 46% of the black males, 34% of the white females, and 30% of the white males. Furthermore, when asked about their perceptions of various statements about this university, 80% of the white males and 77% of the white females strongly agreed that "The cost of attending this college is reasonable," while only 56% of the black females and 54% of the black males so agreed. To a related statement, "This college provides sufficient financial aid for students who need assistance," all four groups indicated slight agreement, but black students were more likely to disagree. In summary, these black freshmen were both more likely than whites to be receiving financial aid, and also were more likely to be concerned with college costs and to be less satisfied with the financial aspects of college attendance. However, this factor alone does not account for the difference in performance between black males and black females, who rely on financial aid even more than do black males. It appears that black females persist in spite of the negative influence of college costs to a significantly greater degree than do black males.

Reasons for attending college. These black males were more likely than their classmates to identify the following as major reasons for attending college (Appendix): 1) to increase my earning power; 2) to qualify for a high-level occupation; 3) to study new and different subjects; 4) to develop and use my athletic skills; 5) parents and/or relatives wanted me to continue my education; 6) high school teachers and/or counselors suggested that I continue my education; 7) I couldn't find anything better to do at this time. Except for the item "to study new and different subjects," each of the reasons for attending college cited more often by black males could be classified as an "external" one: a reason that does not emanate from the intrinsic value of education (e.g to become a better educated person; to develop my mind and intellectual abilities; to become

a more cultured person), but that values education only for the gains to be had as a result of it, from meeting others' expectations, or from extracurricular participation. These black males may find that such external motivations are difficult to maintain in the daily pressures for academic performance. Even the desire "to study new and different subjects" may not assist freshmen in their academic pursuits since freshmen rarely have the opportunity to explore new areas.

Academic needs. To a single, general question asking "Do you anticipate any trouble with studying and doing homework?" about half the freshmen responded "no," with little difference by race and gender. They were also asked to indicate those areas in which they felt they would need special help as they continued their education. A majority of students indicated the need for better study skills and habits, improving mathematics skills, improving public speaking skills, and improving test taking skills, and a sizable minority indicated the need for help in expressing ideas in writing, increasing reading speed, and improving reading comprehension. Black males were not significantly different from the rest of the class except in their greater anticipation of needing help with increasing reading speed (Appendix). Given that these black males reported both the lowest high school GPA's and lowest high school class ranks, it is curious that they were not more likely to perceive a greater need for academic help. Perhaps their academic self-concepts would not allow for admission of need except in the relatively concrete area of increasing reading speed.

Values. A set of locally developed questions attempted to assess the importance of values to the incoming freshmen on a four-point scale ranging from essential to not important. For the total group the percentage rating each as "essential" or "very important" follows: 1) helping others who are in difficulty (69%); 2) developing a meaningful philosophy of life (63%); 3) being well off financially (54%); 4) critically reading what I read and hear (53%); 5) keeping up to date with political affairs (52%); 6) influencing social values (49%); 7) promoting racial understanding (48%); 8) seeking out material that challenges my beliefs and values (47%); 9) creating artistic work (42%); 10) influencing the political structure (25%). Two of these items were rated significantly higher by black males than by the rest of the class (Appendix). These were "being well off financially," and "promoting racial understanding." Black males and females were both more likely to rate "promoting racial understanding" significantly higher than white students. The more interesting differences for the purposes of this study existed in the item "being well off financially," which was rated as "essential" or "very important" by 72% of black males, 67% of black females, 52% of white males, and 49% of white females. Again, although financial success was rated as important to most students, and more important in general to blacks than to whites, in comparison with other values, it ranked higher for black males than for the rest of the class. Black women were more likely than black men to rank the items "developing a meaningful philosophy of life" and "critically evaluating what I read and hear" as important to them.

Extracurricular interests. Finally, this freshman class as a whole indicated extensive extracurricular activity in high school and extensive interest in a variety of extracurricular activities in college. Black males, however, were significantly less interested than the rest of the class in three kinds of activities (student publications, drama and theater, and political organizations), and significantly more interested in racial/ethnic organizations and in both varsity and intramural athletics (Appendix). These expressed interests are consistent with the earlier reported value concerning racial understanding and the reason for attending college indicated more frequently by black males than by the rest of the class, "to develop and use my athletic skills."

FIRST-SEMESTER PERFORMANCE: In the fall of 1989, black male freshmen (n=117) earned an average GPA of 1.92. The GPA for this group ranged from 0.00 (n=6) to 4.00 (n=1). Twenty-two percent (n=25) earned a 2.5 or better, but 44% (n=52) had less than a 2.0. In the spring of 1990, 58% of black males were in good academic standing, compared with 68% of the entire 1989 freshman class. Thirty-eight percent had been placed on academic warning, compared with 25% of the class overall.

The academic performance of this group was therefore consistent with performance of previous groups and with predictions that could have been made based both on pre-enrollment performance data and on information obtained from the survey.

DISCUSSION: The rising tide of interest in the particular problems of young black males, as well as local performance, retention, and graduation data provided the impetus for this comparison of black males with the rest of the 1989 entering freshman cohort. While 23% of the entering freshmen were black, black females outnumbered black males by more than two to one. The smallest racial/gender cohort was therefore black males, who were also more likely than the rest of the class to respond to many survey items that could lead to interpretations of academic vulnerability for this group. That vulnerability was verified by first semester performance data. Although the black males shared many characteristics with the class as a whole, they were less likely to have reported top high-school grades and rank in class, and they were more likely to have indicated extrinsic rather than intrinsic reasons for being in college. They were also more likely to value athletics, and less likely to report needing academic support services. In sum, their previous academic records and their external motivation for being in college may have contributed to an unwarranted confidence in their academic skills, and their motivations and interests may have detracted from academic endeavors. Michael Nettles (1988), in reporting on studies detailing black students' needs in higher education, reflects on the differences between academic integration and social integration. While both are necessary for college persistence and graduation, academic integration is the more crucial. If these black males report lower high school grades and class ranks, and are also likely to be more interested in social and athletic activities, the potential for reaching a high level of social integration at the risk of low academic integration may be great.

In addition to the academic and noncognitive differences noted above, it is also important to appreciate that black students rely more heavily on financial aid than do white students, and are less satisfied with the financial aspects of college attendance. Since black women seem to be able to be more successful in the face of mounting debt than black men, it is apparently not the financial burden alone that mitigates against the persistence of black men. In comparison with black men, black women enter college with better academic records; they intend to work more and to study more; and they express more intrinsic reasons for attending college and more academically oriented values. They thus come better equipped to deal with financial strains.

IMPLICATIONS: This and other studies underscore the importance of early intervention with students who demonstrate the characteristics identified above. Race and gender studies yield information that should be used in academic advising and support, and should serve as the basis for continued investigation. While being careful not to stereotype or to predict behavior based solely on race and/or gender, advising, intervention, and academic and social support services should not ignore potential differences among groups. An individual student's academic history, motivation for being in college, extracurricular interests, values, and perceived need for academic support must be taken into account in the advising process. Large universities with diverse student bodies need pay closer attention to the diverse needs of their students if all students are to be afforded equal opportunity to succeed.

APPENDIX

Items To Which Black Males Reported Lower or Less Likely Responses Than Their Classmates

	CHI-SQUARE PROBABILITY
HIGH SCHOOL PERFORMANCE	
Rank in class	.043
High school grades	.003
EXTRACURRICULAR INTERESTS	
Student publications	.000
Drama, theater	.003
Political organizations	.004

Items To Which Black Males Reported More Likely Responses Than Their Classmates

	CHI-SQUARE PROBABILITY
FINANCIAL AID	.000
REASONS FOR ATTENDING COLLEGE	
To increase earnings	.021
To qualify for a high-level occupation	,010
To study new and different subjects	.018
To develop and use athletic skills	.001
My parents/relatives wanted me to continue	.031
Teachers/counselors suggested I continue	.040
I couldn't find anything better to do	.032
SOURCES OF COLLEGE FUNDING	
Educational grants	.000
Scholarships	.003
Student loans	.000
Other loans	.003
Employment during academic year	.044
Summer employment	.011
ANTICIPATE NEEDING SPECIAL HELP	
Increased reading speed	.013
EXTRACURRICULAR INTERESTS	
Racial/Ethnic organizations	.000
Varsity athletics	.000
Intramural athletics	.000
VALUES	
Being well-off financially	.000
Promoting racial understanding	.000

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